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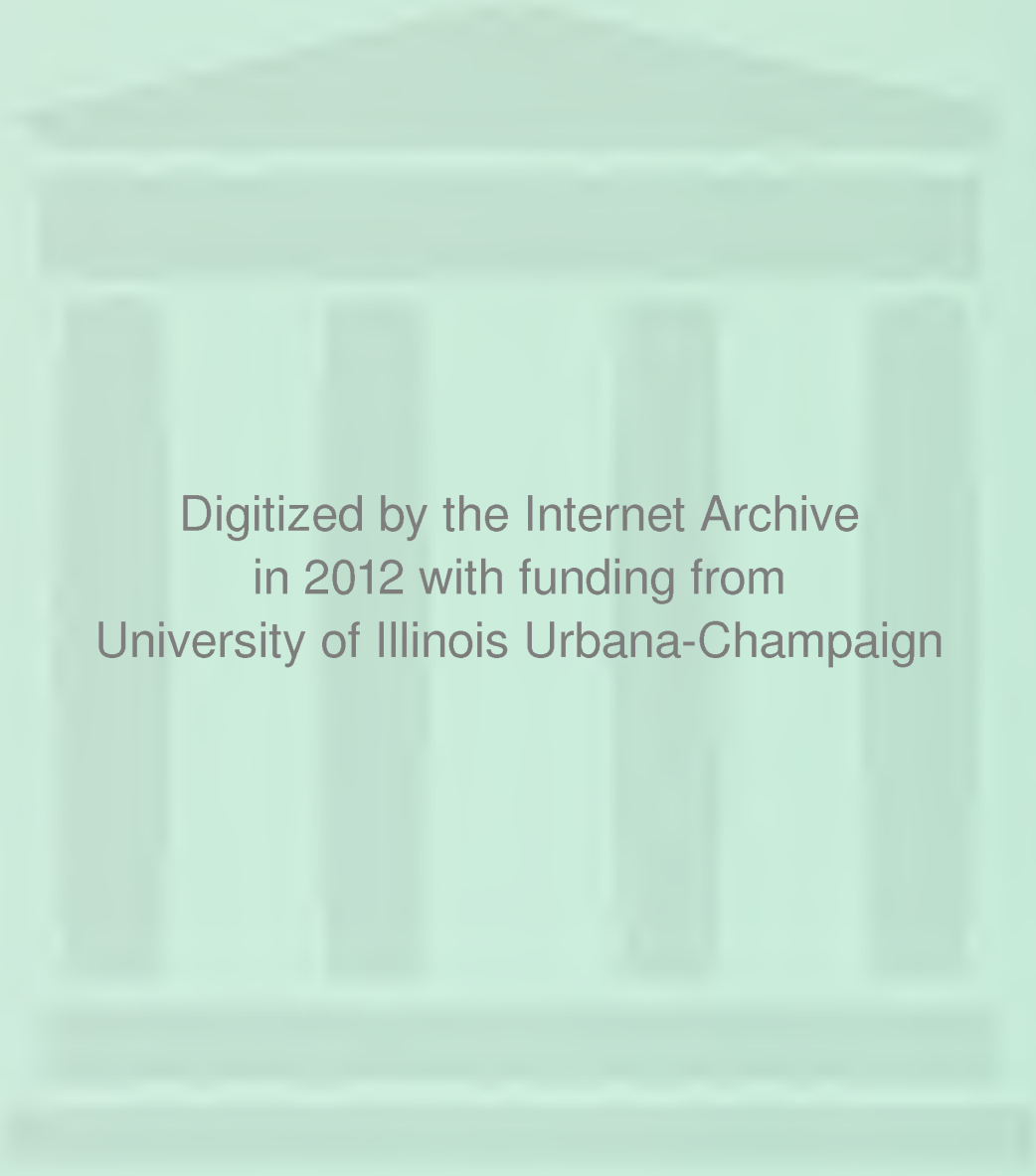
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THE MULTIPLE CAUSES AND COMMONALITY OF ORGANIZATIONAL AND SOCIETAL PROBLEMS

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College of Commerce and Business Administration
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The Multiple Causes and Commonality of Organizational and Societal Problems

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The Multiple Causes and Commonality of Organizational and Societal Problems

Explanations of the cause of organizational and societal problems vary according to ones perspective. On the one hand, it is argued that problems arise when uncertainty exists between one or more of the human and economic factors underlying the existence and functioning of a given organization or society.[1] Others argue that problems are of our own creation and reflect the difference between our perception of where we are and where we want to be.[2] The perspective of this paper is to assume that problems reflect uncertainty between the underlying human and economic relationships of the organization or society and to examine these problems in terms of the degree to which these conflicting relationships are fundamental to the viability of the organization or the society.

Given the foregoing several hypothesis emerge. Among these are 1) that within certain dimensions there is a commonality in terms of the problems faced by organizations and by society, 2) that there exists in every organization and society certain underlying relationships or assumptions, which are fundamental to its existence and viability, and 3) that the problems faced

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[1] Dennis J. Aigner, Principles of Statistical Decision Making 1 (1968).

[2] William F. Pounds, "The Process of Problem Finding," in Readings in Managerial Psychology 115 (Harold J. Leavitt and Louis R. Pondy ed. 1973).

by organizations and societies can be dichotomized between assumptive problems and implementation problems. The balance of the paper will explore these hypotheses and their implications for the solution of organizational and societal problems.

The Nature of Organizational and Societal Assumptions and the Problem Dichotomy

Organizational and societal assumptions act both as constraints in regard to the operation and existence of the organization or society and give rise to problems themselves. In organizations, assumptions characterize the basic relationships defining the interaction of the organization with its external environment and the interaction of its constituent parts. Organizational assumptions dictate basic organizational structures, the basic means of achieving economic and social goals, the market or social responsibility of the organization, and its fundamental relationships with its external environment. A prevailing policy of centralized or decentralized managerial control, the use of a production line in a production organization, the identification of the health care needs of a defined population as the market of a private, not-for-profit hospital, and the identification of the organization as a firm operated for a profit or as a not-for-profit entity are all examples of organizational assumptions.

In a society assumptions relate to those basic beliefs,

precepts, social theories, and social relationships, underlying the social order. Democracy, capitalism, federalism, and the separation of church and state are but some of our societal assumptions. Additional societal assumptions are embeded within our constitutions, legal structure, and customs. These include the organization, scope of responsibility, and interrelationship between various societal institutions and social organizations. When conflict arises in the context of either an organizational or societal assumption, we have an assumptive problem.

Societal and organizational assumptions are characterized by several qualities. In the short run and in the absence of a major organizational or social change, they generally involve static relationships. They are fundamental for the existence of the organization, social institutions, or society, and they may be either explicitedly or implicitedly stated. Organizational assumptions relate to both the external and the internal interaction of the organization, with its sub-units, and its environment. Particularly in the case of society as a whole, its assumptions are frequently codified in its legal system thus increasing their inflexibility and difficulty to change.

In contrast to the fundamental relationships that are characterized as assumptive, other human and economic relationships can be generally classed as implementation relationships and be said to give rise to implementation problems. Such problems represent a broad continuum both in terms of their

complexity and the importance of their resolution. In organizations, implementation characterizes all types of relationships whether internal or external arising as a consequence of the ongoing existence of the organization but operating within the constraints imposed by organizational assumptions. Among the implementation problems that arise are those relating to the ongoing operation of the organization, the human interactions within the organization, and the planning process. In short all problems not related in terms of their origin to the fundamental assumptions of the organization are implementation problems.

With regard to societal relationships, implementation characterizes all mechanisms, institutions, and customs utilized to achieve social goals within the constraints laid down by societal assumptions. Societal implementation problems include those arising as a consequence of our efforts to develop programs and social mechanisms to achieve social policies whether they be policies to encourage capital formation, encourage competition, redistribute wealth, or provide social services. All social problems not related in terms of their cause to the fundamental assumptions of the society are implementation problems.

In summary this section has discussed the nature or organizational and societal assumptions and contrasted assumptive and implementation problems. The next section will explore the importance of fundamental assumptions in terms of resolving problems and the reasons this dimension of problem-solving is

frequently ignored.

The Importance of Assumptions for the Solution of Problems

Two questions remain to be explored. First, the importance of fundamental assumptions in resolving organizational and societal problems and, second, the reasons this dimension of reality is frequently ignored. The remainder of this paper will address these questions. While the enumeration of problems and their identification as being either assumptive or implementation problems will lead to the conclusion that most problems fall within the implementation category, the importance of assumptive problems lies in their nature as relating to the fundamental human and economic factors underlying the existence of the organization or society. The solution of implementation problems assumes stability in regard to assumptive relationships. While assumptive problems do arise with considerable less frequency than implementation problems, they are far more critical for they ultimately involve the long-term viability of the organization or society.

Assumptive problems are ignored, or at least infrequently discussed, for several reasons. A major reason lies in the evolution of our disciplinary structure for the perpetuation and expansion of knowledge.[3] Historically, most branches of

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[3]Discussed in greater depth in Howard W. Melton, "The Nature of Disciplines and the Conduct of Interdisciplinary Inquiry," Faculty Working Paper #238, College of Commerce and Business Administration, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (1975).

human knowledge were relatively limited in scope and in their need for specialized training, and, as a consequence, were generally accessible to the small percentage of the population one would consider as being educated. Beyond this, several of the predominant paradigms actively utilized for solving problems stressed the assumptive dimensions of problems even when this was inappropriate. Such paradigms included philosophy, theology, and law. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the rapid expansion of knowledge and the growth of institutions of higher education speeded the development of academic specialities or disciplines. Among the responsibilities of the disciplines is the conduct of academic inquiry which is itself a process for problem solution operationalized by a decision-process operating within the constraints of a disciplinary paradigm. Concurrent with these developments was the development of the concept of scientific inquiry. The intent of science is to formulate the laws of nature and the specifications of substances, events, and behavior in descriptions sufficiently broad and abstract to encompass as large a set of factual situations as possible.[4] While its methodology is not to be equated with science, the methodology employed has tended to emphasize the application of systemized procedures and implies a decision-

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[4]Reno Dubar, Reason Awake: Science for Man 20 (1970).

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process utilizing the laws of logic.[5]

Disciplinary inquiry operates within the boundries of disciplinary paradigms.[6] Although such paradigms must recognize the necessity of interacting with their external environment and will periodically undergo fundamental change, there exists a powerful impetus for accepting the paradigm as fundamentally correct and for proceeding to evolve problem-solving strategies from this starting point. Science is a specialized problem-solving technique utilized to a greater or lesser extent by numerous disciplines. Here again the emphasis is upon the acceptance of the fundamental paradigm in use and the extension of the paradigm to its logical conclusion. In addition to these factors, the rapid development of technology and the complexity of contemporary problems have worked together to compartmentalize knowledge and emphasize the solution of implementation problems. While this process has been fruitful and we have seen the development of science, scientific management, quantitative decision

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[5]Abraham Kaplan, The Conduct of Inquiry 24 (1964).

[6]The concept of disciplinary paradigms in a specialized utilization of the "paradigm" concept presented by Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revaluation (1962). Whereas Kuhn generally restricts his concept of the paradigm to those disciplines utilizing the scientific method and more explicitly to those with a developed and accepted theoretical framework, the concept of the disciplinary paradigms is that a paradigm exist regardless of the existance or acceptance of a theoretical framework and regardless of whether the scientific method is the mode for acquiring and expanding knowledge within the discipline. For further discussion see Howard W. Melton, supra. note 3, at 6.

aids, decision theory, small group decision theory and a great deal more, their common denominator lies in addressing the solution of implementation problems. Within our contemporary timeframe, the disciplines most interested in the process of solving problems are those that emphasize, whether consciously or not, the solution of problems of implementation. Thus, our orientation for solving problems, whether as academics or practitioners, in itself speaks to the absence of the consideration of problems relating to societal and organizational assumptions.

The process by which we generally approach the solution of problems suggests another reason we frequently ignore the assumptive nature of many problems. Whether a problem arises in the context of an organization, either economic or social, or is in the nature of a more general societal problem, our fundamental approach to its solution has many common characteristics. The basic steps include, (1) problem formulation, (2) the collection of data concerning the problem and the identification of feasible, alternative solutions, (3) the use of some problem-solving process including, in selected situations, programed decision-making aids, and (4) the resulting solution or, as the case may be, non-solution of the problem. The approach taken in each step will vary according to our experience, training, and breadth of understanding of the specific problem being examined. The first among these generalized steps is process of problem formulation. Though frequently ignored, this step may be the most fundamental

in resolving problems for the definition of the problem frequently determines our approach to its solution including the identification of alternative solutions and the appropriate decision process to be utilized. Our tendancy to ignore the problem formulation step frequently results in our treatment of assumptive problems as implementation problems and almost assures an inappropriate solution. Examples of this phenomenon appear in the next section.

In summary this section has discussed the importance of recognizing the assumptive attributes of problems and the reasons such attributes are frequently ignored. Among these reasons are our disciplinary structure for perpetuating and expanding knowledge, our reliance upon scientific inquiry, and our traditional approaches for solving problems.

Observation Concerning Assumptive Problems and Examples of Such Problems

Having discussed the division between assumptive and implementation problems, several observations are in order. First, regardless of our success in solving implementation problems, a problem that is essentially assumptive will remain unresolved until it is approached from the standpoint of its assumptive dimensions. In the public arena this observation is illustrated by the problem of public school financing. In states where a

large share of the burden of public school financing is provided by local property taxes, ther is a continuing problem of adequately financing school districts with a lessor proportionate tax base. Not only does this situation create inequities between districts but encourages an even greater concentration of taxable property in districts with a relatively greater proportionate tax base. Whereas a wide range of programs including incentive plans to encourage greater local support and modified redistribution plans, all implementation solutions, are utilized to correct the inequities generated, the problem is basically assumptive and requiree a funadmental solution such as one hundred per cent state financing of the public schools while allowing the retention of complete control over the expenditure of funds to remain with the local units.

Second, many problems contain elements of both the assumptive and implementation dimensions. This not only complicates their resolution, but, again, point to the importance of both dimensions when attempting to solve organizational and societal problems. Worker productivity, a topic of continuing concern within organizations, was first addressed by substituting capital for labor. Beyond the substitution threshhold, attempts to motivate the individual employee normally involve structured short-term reward schemes or repressive controls, in both case implementation solutions. Given our advances in addressing problems involving micro level man-machine relationships and small group processes,

a substantial improvement in worker productivity at this point in our social and economic development most likely involves fundamental changes in the organization of our productive processes, in the relationship of the worker to the organization, or some combination of such changes. In any regard, such changes relate to the underlying assumptions of the organization and its relationship to the worker. The question of achieving greater worker productivity, therefore, involves both assumptive and implementational dimensions and must be addressed from this perspective.

Third, the recognition of the importance of assumptive relationships in terms of the solution of organizational and societal problems opens an entirely new area of research for those disciplines primarily focusing upon problems of implementation and legitimates the efforts of those disciplines presently addressing the assumptive dimensions of problems. Fourth, assumptive problems are frequently broad, generalized, and elusive in terms of generating an appropriate solution. While these qualities complicate the generation of solutions particularly in institutions such as universities which are not structured so as to encourage the solution of macro level problems, they also suggest the appropriateness of using interdisciplinary strategies to resolve this class of problem. Fifth, specifying the cause or the solutions to any problem, whether it be one of assumption or implementation, in no way limits the importance

of implementing such a solution. Sixth, though tightening internal control is a natural reaction in the case of either a societal or organizational problem, this is seldom more than a short run solution in cases where the problem is assumptive in nature. Seventh, a simple increase in the expenditure of resources will seldom solve an undiagnosed or improperly diagnosed problem. Eighth, the fact that the dimensions of many assumptive problems are not bounded by a single discipline complicates our ability to identify and resolve such problems and again points out the appropriateness of interdisciplinary approaches for their solution.

This section of the paper has provided additional observations concerning assumptive problems and the dichotomy between assumptive and implementation problems as well as illustrated problems having assumptive attributes. The final section will provide a short summary and conclusion for the paper.

Summary and Conclusions

The major hypothesis of this paper was that there exists in every organization and society certain underlying assumptions, which are fundamental to its existence and viability. These assumptions act both as constraints in regard to the operation of the organization and the solution of organizational and societal problems and give rise to problems themselves. Problems other than assumptive problems were classed as problems of implementation. While most problems we face relate to imple-

mentation, assumptive problems may be the most critical because they are fundamental in natu e and frequently general in scope, both qualities which complicate their solution. Problems relating to organizational and societal assumptions are ignored for a variety of reasons including our disciplinary structure for perpetuating and expanding knowledge, the impact of the scientific method, and the basic nature of this class of problem. While problems relating to basic assumptions are complex in their identification, articulation, and resolution, the solution of our organizational and societal problems requires that we recognize their existence and carefully distinguish between this class of problem and those of implementation.

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